

UA study: Travel near, not on, holiday when most accidents happen

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TUSCALOOSA, Ala. -- A recent University of Alabama study shows that the days preceding and following holidays -- not the holidays themselves -- pose the highest risk for serious crashes involving injuries or fatalities.

UA's Center for Advanced Public Safety's recent study of 2008 Alabama crashes involving injuries or fatalities found that the typical holiday has a low serious-crash number because most people have already reached their destinations and tend to remain there. For this reason, for example, Thanksgiving Day in 2008 was the 13th lowest day of the year for serious crashes.

With a reduction in gas prices, researchers said, more people are driving long distances, rather than flying. This is one explanation as to why the number of serious crashes surrounding Thanksgiving were high on the Friday preceding Thanksgiving and on the weekend following the holiday.

The Friday immediately after Thanksgiving, meanwhile, has several risk factors for crashes given that it's one of the busiest shopping days of the year. Also, many people begin leaving their Thanksgiving celebrations and returning home. On average, Fridays have 25 percent more serious crashes than other days of the week.

"There are definitely times to be avoided, especially if bad weather is a possibility," said Dr. Allen Parrish, professor of computer science and director of CAPS at The University of Alabama.

Parrish noted typical problem days that would be wise to avoid:

- The two days following Thanksgiving.
- The Wednesday before Thanksgiving, especially late in the day.
- Christmas Eve.
- The nighttime hours of New Year's Eve and New Years Day.



[View full size](#) (Dan Anderson/Special to the Register) One of the "Operation 40 Proof" vehicles is seen in this 2004 photo taken on Airport Boulevard near Interstate 65 in Mobile, Ala. The operation tries to curb highway deaths at the holidays. A new University of Alabama study has found that it's the days near the holidays, not the holidays themselves, that pose the highest risk for travelers.

Much like the Thanksgiving holiday, the days surrounding Christmas are more dangerous than Christmas Day. In 2008, Christmas Day had only 33 serious crashes, one of the lowest numbers for the year. However, Christmas Eve had 100 crashes, making it one of the days with the most serious crashes. People often hurrying to get last-minute presents on Christmas Eve may account for the higher crash number.

Alcohol consumption also typically increases around the holidays and is another added risk factor. While New Year's Eve is always a night to be cautious because of the higher number of people drinking, in 2008 the number of serious crashes actually fell below average with 69 on New Year's Eve and only 40 on New Year's Day.

"We credit this to the programs that are launched during the holidays to encourage designated drivers and the heavy enforcement efforts that have proven effective in getting the DUI drivers off the road," said Parrish.

The largest exception to the pattern of serious crashes falling on the days surrounding the holiday, rather than the holiday itself, in 2008 was Halloween, which was the 13th highest day for crashes. Halloween was on a Friday, and there were more people on the streets for Halloween festivities.